

## **Warning: Your septic system could be harming your drinking water**

Have you looked at your septic system lately? Before you say, “Yuk!” consider this: Septic systems pose the second largest threat to groundwater quality in the US, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. (The first is LUST, which doesn’t stand for anything racy but for leaking underground storage tanks.)

Would you want to drink what comes out of a failing septic system?

The good news is that a properly functioning septic system does a superb job of cleaning the water, protecting both human health and the environment. The bad news, says the EPA, is that 10 to 20 percent of systems are not functioning properly. Is yours one of them?

On Hood Canal, on the west side of Puget Sound, algae blooms and fish kills have led to fishing closures. The state’s Puget Sound Action Team blames septic systems for about 60 percent of the human contribution to the problem, according to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

A failed (or improperly functioning) system could be expensive for both you and the community.

About 30 percent of King County’s population relies on groundwater wells for drinking water. That’s over half a million people. If your system fails, it could cost you up to \$25,000 to replace it. And contaminated groundwater could cost the community (that means you, as a ratepayer) millions to clean up. Governor Christine Gregoire wants to spend \$5 million on the Hood Canal cleanup.

Regular maintenance will help keep your system running smoothly, just like taking care of a car or bike. Help protect your investment in your septic system, and help keep your drinking water clean. Here are a few simple steps:

**1. Be water smart.** The more water you use, the harder your system needs to work and the sooner it will need to be maintained or replaced. More than 26 percent of the water used by the average family goes to flushing the toilet and more than 21 percent to washing clothes. Save money over the long run by investing in a water-saving toilet, and wash only full loads of laundry.

**2. Have your system inspected regularly.** The frequency depends on type of system and whether you use a garbage disposal. King County now requires a certified On-site System Monitor to monitor and maintain your septic system. You can get a list of certified maintainers from Public Health, Seattle & King County (see web site below).

**3. Keep harmful materials out of your septic tank.** Here’s a list of what NOT to put down your tank.

**Can't decompose in tank:**

- Grease
- Cooking fats
- Newspaper
- Paper towels
- Rags
- Coffee grounds
- Sanitary napkins
- Cigarettes

**Can harm your tank's functioning and pollute groundwater:**

- Solvents
- Oils
- Paint
- Pesticides

**Are unnecessary and don't improve performance:**

- Septic tank additives

**4. Protect your system from damage.** Here are some septic system “don'ts”:

- No vehicles or heavy equipment on septic tank or drainfield.
- No excess water. Divert water from roofs, driveways and patios away from septic system.
- No impermeable materials, such as plastic or concrete, over your drainfield. That means no decks or patios in that area.
- No deep-rooting plants over your drainfield. Grass is the best cover for your system.

**To find out more**

For information on how to maintain your septic system and a list of septic professionals, visit [www.metrokc.gov/health/wastewater/owners/index.htm](http://www.metrokc.gov/health/wastewater/owners/index.htm) or call 206-296-4600.

*This article has been furnished by the Redmond-Bear Creek Groundwater Protection Committee.*